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ABSTRACT

This study focuses upon the rock concert as a ceremonial or epideictic rhetoric. A major function of rhetoric, Kenneth Burke suggests, is to achieve a symbolic transcendence of the sense of division among men. Rock music, the author contends, fulfills this Burkean definition and serves the dual function of identification and unification for the youth subculture. The rock concert is described as a kind of modern ritual. Associated with rock are prescribed standards of dress, behavior, and performance. A life-style, generally challenging the "official" morality, is established. Messages about human relationships and societal norms are conveyed by the song lyrics of the music and by the progression of the concert itself. These messages are not didactically communicated to the listener, but are open to individual adaptation and interpretation. Thus the music becomes a ritual of self-confirmation. Through the process of sharing the music, youth culture unification is established. (Author/LG)

EPIDEICTIC RHETORIC IN THE CONTEXT OF RITUAL BEHAVIOR: ROCK CONCERTS

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(This paper is an excerpt from a longer and more thorough study. Copies of the original are available by mail--write to me at the Department of Speech Communication and Drama, Cal State L.A., Los Angeles, Cal. 90032.)

The study of epideictic rhetoric has been overshadowed in recent years by interest in deliberative and forensic oratory. Legislative and legal rhetoric may be of more immediate importance than ceremonial rhetoric, but it is possible that ceremonial speech gains importance when viewed in a long range, cultural perspective. This paper will consider the rock concert as ceremonial or epideictic rhetoric.

Kenneth Burke suggests that a major function of rhetoric is to achieve symbolic transcendence of the sense of division among men. He observes that

Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity.¹

This paper will argue that, for the youth sub-culture, rock music serves the dual functions of identification and unification. This music, for its audience, is a way of "acting-together" which makes the members of the sub-culture "consubstantial."

Dell Hymes, like Burke, is interested in the functions of speech and other symbolic behavior. An important insight is that "speech may have different scope and functional load in the communicative economies of different societies."² Thus the study of speech must be integrated with the study of the culture of which it is a part. Expectations relating to communication vary cross-culturally. Hymes recommends the cross-cultural study of the functions of genres, such as music, dance, drama, etc., which participate in the communicative life of a society. This paper will suggest that rock music is a genre peculiar to a sub-culture within our society. It is comparable in form to the popular music of the larger culture, but differs

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substantially in function. While the middle-aged, middle-class society views popular music as a mere diversion, rock music assumes a ritual function for the sub-culture it serves. The ritual of rock symbolizes the social values of the youth culture.

The relationship between epideictic rhetoric and ritual is described in an interesting paper on Samoan rhetoric by Samuel R. Johnson.³ He suggests that the purpose of epideictic oratory in the ritual context may be the transmission of cultural values rather than persuasion to a view point. In the Samoan case, Johnson is concerned with the ritual speaking of the tribal "talking chief," which is ". . . aimed as a confirmation of established ceremonial practices and cultural information."⁴ The content of such rhetoric is not "Praise and Blame" as Aristotle would suggest, but "Culture and History" of the society. Johnson directly disputes the Neo-Aristotelian assumption that persuasion is the major object of rhetoric. In fact, the Samoan audience may appropriately respond by holding its old views more devoutly rather than shifting to a new viewpoint suggested by the speaker.

Though Johnson outlines the function of ritual as a genre of communication, he fails to provide any detailed definition of ritual in support of his view.

Anthropologist Ruth Benedict defines ritual as ". . . a form of prescribed and elaborated behavior that occurs both as the spontaneous invention of the individual . . . and as a cultural trait."⁵ Most anthropologists would add that ritual behavior cannot be justified by a "rational" means-to-ends explanation. Thus, shaking hands is ritual while planting a crop is not. Some writers make a distinction between ritual and ceremony, ritual being prescribed behavior in a religious context, ceremony prescribed behavior in a secular context. It seems to me that the sacred-secular distinction is unnecessary and might serve to mask religious aspects of secular behavior as well as secular aspects of religious behavior. In this paper "ritual"

will be used as a generic term appropriate to both sacred and secular contexts. Edmund Leach defines ritual as a form of symbolic exchange, stating that, ". . . almost every human action that takes place in culturally defined surroundings is divisible . . . it has a technical aspect which does something and an aesthetic, communicative aspect which says something."⁶ It is the "aesthetic, communicative aspect" which Leach considers to constitute ritual.

Ruth Benedict identifies the cultural significance of ritual behavior when she writes that,

The beliefs and ideals of different civilizations are often formulated in their general ritual more explicitly than in other cultural traits, and this fact gives to the study of ritual a significance that has as yet scarcely been touched upon. Comparative studies of these intensively developed themes of ritual in various cultures can be of great importance to social psychology. They can make use of an explicit body of poetry and song and behavior which throws light on the basic attitudes of different cultures.

Thus it might be appropriate to describe ritual as the prescribed or elaborated segment of human behavior which conveys messages about human relationships and about societal norms, beliefs or ideals. This definition is broad enough to encompass a wide variety of human symbolic activity but focuses on its common function.

Rock-Ritual

Using the definitions and functions of ritual described above, I will describe the rock concert as a kind of modern ritual. Rock music may be described as ritualistic because it has "prescribed or elaborated" elements and conveys the norms of a particular sub-culture. There are generally prescribed standards of dress, behavior and performance associated with rock. The rock culture also establishes a sort of idealized life-style which rock artists are thought to live and followers would like to live. This includes abundant sex, drugs and general challenging of the official morality. The rock concert itself is expected to be characterized by a spirit of peace, harmony,

and community. Use of drugs and wine drinking is common and often communal.

One of the ritual functions of the rock concert seems to be to convey messages about human relationships and about societal norms, beliefs or ideals. These messages are conveyed by the lyrics of the music and by the progression of the concert itself. The forms of participation and interaction which are part of the concert "experience" are messages about social and personal relationships and elements of "ritual" behavior.

The general personal/social messages of the rock concert are self-confirmation for the individual participant and group identity through adherence to common ideals and values of the "youth sub-culture." If these two meanings can be separated, it might appear that the bulk of the self-confirmation function is carried by the lyrics. They, as I argue below, uniquely underline the beliefs and experiences of the serious listener. The group identity function is served by the lyrics, the instrumentation and the non-musical concomitants of the concert.

Turning to the lyrics of the music, even cursory listening suggests that rock lyrics deal with contemporary social and political issues. Some of the more famous examples are:

The Rolling Stones "Street Fighting Man"

The Beatles "Eleanor Rigby"

Jefferson Airplane "White Rabbit"

Rock critic Burton H. Wolfe described the major subjects of rock lyrics:

No subjects, no words must be banned. Drugs, death, violence, war, race prejudice, sex, religion, and the President of the United States must all be discussed, challenged, pranked, and satirized with complete openness. Hence, Country Joe and the Fish use the word "fuck" on television and describe President Johnson as 'a man insane' in the song Superbird. The Fugs sing 'kill, kill for peace' as part of what their leader, Ed Sanders, calls their 'total assault on the culture.'⁸

The lyrics of the songs suggest a general attitude of defiance and resistance to the existing order which is viewed as corrupt, hypocritical, and

on a "death trip."

The interpretation of lyrics is an important subject, from both the perspectives of communication and ritual. Since many of the lyrics are unintelligible or obscure, the listener is given great latitude in deriving their "meaning." In fact, there seems to be no set, established, absolutely correct interpretation. When asked what a song "means" most musicians will reply "it's all there" "it's all in the music" or "it's what you hear." Rock critic Griel Marcus offers a rather detailed analysis of the problem of meaning in rock lyrics and explains a method of interpreting the songs. He says that,

Two people may try to talk about it, perhaps; but they will get closer to the truth by placing the experience in front of them, starting with a shared understanding of a common purpose and an unspoken language of intuition and emotion, ending with a respect for the experience as well as for each other. Thus the communication is perfect, among those lucky enough to be a part of it. But on another level, communication is impossibly difficult and confused.

. . .

Perfectly communicable in that there is mutual trust that the situation is ours, that we have each and together made it our own; it can't destroy us; it can only be relived and reexperienced with each hearing of our metaphor. Impossibly communicable in that we never know exactly what our friend is experiencing.⁹

Marcus' explanation of listener response to lyrics is similar to I.A. Richards' discussion of the emotive use of language in poetry and other forms of communication. Richards believes that,

We may either use words for the sake of the references they promote, or we may use them for the sake of the attitudes and emotions which ensue. Many arrangements or words evoke attitudes without any reference being required en route. They operate like musical phrases. But usually references are involved as conditions for, or stages in, the ensuing development of attitudes, yet it is still the attitudes not the references which are important.

. . .

. . . for emotive language the widest differences in reference are of no importance if the further effects in attitude and emotion are of the required kind.¹⁰

Two people may have widely different referential reactions to a word or phrase and yet share similar emotive responses. In this case, according to Marcus, discussion of the referents is irrelevant. What is important is sharing of the attitude or emotion engendered by the words or sounds.

To be ritual, the music must communicate socially important ideas to the listener. The ideas, however, are open textured. They are not didactic but are susceptible to adaptation and interpretation by each listener. In McLuhan's terms, this is a "cool" medium. The social meaning conveyed is conditioned by the private meaning of the listener. The music becomes a ritual of self-confirmation. The phrase "says" whatever mental association it conjures up in each listener's mind. Though there is some commonality in the framework provided by the lyrics, the music seems to become, at least partly, a uniquely personal ritual conducted between the performer and the individual listener.

But ritual also has an essentially social function: to convey the norms and values of the society it serves. It has been suggested that rock music, perhaps more than any other phenomenon, defines young people as members of a separate social class.¹¹ The societal "ritual" of rock consists of the communication of youth community values and their confirmation through the process of sharing the music. Abstracting from this body of music, there seem to be two overriding themes which are important in varying degrees in nearly all rock music. First, the music urges and encourages emotionality at the expense of rationality. Its message is essentially humanistic. Other more specific themes are evident, but most of them fit into this overall framework.

Theodore Roszak in The Making of a Counter Culture isolates the term "technocracy" to point to the defining aspect of mainstream American culture. The technocracy relies on rationality and competition, but many young people

reject it in favor of more personally meaningful life-styles. Roszak enthusiastically concludes his analysis,

There will have to be experiments--in education, in communitarianism-- . . . which aim . . . at subverting and seducing by the force of innocence, generosity, and manifest happiness in a world where those qualities are synically abandoned in favor of bad substitutes. To the end that there shall be more and more of our fellows who cease to live by the declared necessities of the technocracy; who refuse to settle for a mere after-hours outlet for the magical potentialities of their personalities; who become as if deaf and blind to the blandishments of career, affluence, the mania of consumption, politics, technological progress: who can at last find only a sad smile for the low quality of these values and pass them by.¹²

The culture of the youth, then, rejects traditional values and seeks an essentially humanistic social life. Rock lyrics are one means of transmitting and confirming these values, of "subverting and seducing" the technocracy.¹³

Rock music, then, is a major aspect of the youth culture. In an otherwise diverse and disparate society, the rock concert may be the greatest single unifying ritual for the youth culture. The concert is a symbolic act, a form of epideictic rhetoric, designed to bridge divisions between individuals, to establish their identification with each other and as members of a special sub-culture. It is a personal and social ritual of unification.

If the analysis presented here is accepted, it seems that rhetorical analysis must move from nearly exclusive concern with public speaking to the study of the normal patterns of informal symbolic behavior. At this point, rhetoric intersects the anthropological and sociological study of communication.

The study of ritual as a genre of communication seems to be appropriate and useful. By examining the social forms that are customary in a particular culture or sub-culture theorists can gain insight into the underlying ideals, values, and norms of the society. The injunction, from Burke and Hymes, to search for the functions of communication seem to be particularly relevant to ritual.

Notes

- ¹Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley, 1969), 127-317.
- ²Dell Hymes, "Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life," Unpublished mimeo.
- ³Samual R. Johnson, "The Non-Aristotelian Nature of Samoan Ceremonial Oratory," Western Speech, 34 (Fall, 1970), 265.
- ⁴Ibid. 265.
- ⁵Ruth Benedict, "Ritual," Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Vol. 13, 1934, 397.
- ⁶Edmund R. Leach, "Ritual," Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 1968, 523.
- ⁷Benedict, 397.
- ⁸Burton H. Wolfe, "The New Music and the New Scene," in Jonathan Eisen (Ed.) The Age of Rock (New York, 1969), 32.
- ⁹Greil Marcus, "Who Put the Bomp in the Bomp De-Bomp De-Bomp?" in Greil Marcus (Ed.), Rock and Roll Will Stand (Boston), 1969, 22-23.
- ¹⁰I.A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism (New York, 1925), 267-268.
- ¹¹Dave Charbonneau, Minneapolis rock musician, during a tape recorded interview.
- ¹²Theodore Roszak, The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition (Garden City, 1968), 266.
- ¹³An excellent example of this strategy is the Paul Kantner/Jefferson Starship album Blows Against the Empire (RCA LSP-4448).